

What Role Does the Heritage Language Play in Chinese Communities in UK?

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Abstract: This article examines the pivotal role of heritage language on Chinese diaspora communities in the UK, emphasizing its role in cultural transmission and identity formation. It emphasizes how community schools serve as essential platforms for heritage language education, enabling immigrant families to preserve their linguistic and cultural connections. The interplay between language learning and the socio-cultural environment is explored, revealing the challenges faced by learners and the significance of family education in this progress. Mastery of heritage language is shown to foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride, contributing to the construction of identities in a multicultural society. The article further discusses how heritage language education not only imparts linguistic skills but also installs cultural values and beliefs, reinforcing national identity among diaspora members. Ultimately, it underscores the transformative impact of heritage language on individual and collective identities, facilitating a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and promoting intercultural awareness within the diverse landscape of contemporary Britain.

Keywords: Heritage Language, Cultural Transmission, Identity Formation, Community Schools.

1. Introduction

This article analyses several influences of heritage language on Chinese communities, with particular reference to Chinese. Diaspora has gradually evolved from a relatively narrow definition in the beginning to the concept that people understand it today, experiencing an expansion of its lexical meaning. In the beginning the word took its etymology from the ancient Greek word *diaspeirein*, yet today the concept of diaspora is controversial and is often described as a group of people who have travelled from their place of origin to some other place, forming a state of homelessness and belonging neither entirely to the place of origin nor to their destination.[1] These immigrant heritage languages refer to the languages spoken by people who constitute a minority in society, for example, the languages spoken by native peoples, languages spoken by immigrants, languages that are widely spoken in the world but are not official languages in the local area, languages of ethnic minorities, etc.[2] The Chinese diaspora has the third largest population of any country in the world and has a long history dating back over 2000 years.[3] In the UK, community schools are where knowledge is imparted to a new generation of diaspora, and where a sense of expatriate identity and language culture is fostered, so that students in Chinese communities learn the language of heritage, and the

heritage culture that comes with the language.[4] This article will analyse the impact of the Chinese diaspora in the transmission and reception of heritage languages.

2. The role and impact of Heritage Language itself as a language

For Chinese diaspora within the UK, the use of heritage language instead of home English is desirable, as the community language in expatriate-centred communities is closer to heritage language than home English.[5] Firstly, when learning heritage language across cultures it is important to understand the constructs of language, which plays an important role when it comes to human social activity. The social environment and language are in a relationship of mutual influence: the social environment influences the formation and development of language, and likewise language potentially influences society [5]. Like many diasporas in immigrant countries who do not have the means to better learn their pre-immigrant heritage language, students in Chinese communities often do not have the means to understand the meaning of figurative nouns when they learn, which are words produced in specific contexts, so when heritage language transmission takes place in Chinese communities in the UK, language and culture are partially stripped away.[6] To a certain extent, China's vast territory and cultural diversity is on full display within the country, so the influence of geopolitical factors is significant and to a certain extent creates difficulties in the diaspora when learning Chinese.[7] As China is a large country, the characteristic languages will vary from place to place, some areas are ethnic languages and others are dialects with a variant of Mandarin, so when Chinese is taught in the Chinese community in the UK, it will also be the case that different kinds of Chinese are learned and used in the Chinese community, with the official Chinese Mandarin dominating and the rest being Hakka, Cantonese and so on.

Chinese language education at community schools ensures that first and second generation diasporans continue to learn their ancestral language while also passing on their cultural heritage to the next generation.[8] Diaspora language, particularly Chinese, on the other hand, is concerned with people's lived experiences, and heritage language plays an important role in diaspora understanding of the intercultural world. Chinese is taught in a variety of ways depending on the cultural context. Ordinarily, language is taught through the observation of literary works for appreciation and recognition, or through some written records with research implications; however, when a heritage language is included, it is given a cross-cultural element, and the direction of language teaching is communicated through some accessible entities in lived experience, and culture should be critically defined.

In addition to community schools, family education is an important form of Chinese teaching as a heritage language and that communication between parents and teachers can have a great effect on students' learning.[9] The importance of family education in Chinese families of one-child immigrants to the UK, and that this family education is imbibed by experience and is different from community schools also have been discussed, family relationships also influence the behavioural characteristics of the second generation of immigrants, particularly in terms of Chinese parents' expectations that their children will acquire as many skills as possible, both in their heritage language and in English, their language after immigration.[10]

In this study, almost the majority of a group of elementary school students agreed that language skills for learning Chinese were of primary importance, with skills including improving speaking and reading and writing skills.[4] Some of the interviewees said that when learning Chinese in Chinese community schools, their fellow teachers were bilingual, so it was easier to communicate in both languages if they did not know any questions when learning Chinese, because learning heritage language in community schools is performed in a state of similar linguistic conditions of the people learning together, thus emphasising the importance of the language environment in community schools.[11]

In Chinese community schools, learning takes on different meanings and purposes for minors and adults from the diaspora. As a result, the purpose of learning must be made clear before the heritage language is taught. Others believed that their Chinese identity drove them to the community school to learn their heritage language and that the community school provided a specific language environment that made the development of students' heritage languages more important in the community school setting, especially after some students' home education did not include the use of the heritage language to the same extent.[4] Students may come up with ideas based on what they are learning in the community, such as controversial teaching models, textbooks, and other factors, at some point in their academic careers [4].

Some expatriates had learnt Chinese before they migrated or could communicate fluently with their relatives during their home education, so being in a community school was a way to better connect with literacy skills [4]. And as parents of these diaspora teenagers who have mastered basic Chinese, the main purpose of encouraging their children to go to community schools is so that they can gain a sense of identity and identification with their culture among a group of people who make up a minority in society at large.[6]

3. The impact and role of Heritage language in culture

It is useful to interpret and transmit a sense of social and cultural values and beliefs by using the language of heritage and oral tradition.[8] While there is no doubt that language and culture are closely related, it has been pointed out that different languages when viewed from a global cross-cultural perspective reveal that different linguistic communities return to various ways of thinking and behaving in order to solve problems, so that even the same language or even the same word can mean different things in various cultural contexts.[12]

In the UK, Chinese community schools teach specific language skills mainly through organising life-experience activities, for example through traditional festivals, through specific occasions and specific settings, and this form of language teaching is informal and revolves around activities centred on student-teacher interaction rather than textbook-centred. The latter can make the teaching of genetic language less attractive as it is.[6] As the teaching is aimed at the diaspora in the Chinese community, the content is brought to life so that each student is engaged. In that study, learners in the Chinese community felt that language and culture were inextricably linked, which may be a function of combining the content with each of the specific activities.[6]

Neither the heritage language nor the modern language are being taught objectively. It was stated that teachers would instruct students based on their knowledge of the culture of the heritage language they were teaching.[6] Educators in the Chinese community want to spread traditional Chinese culture, and they have a number of beliefs that support them, including the following: to build connections with their students so that they can communicate and interact with them through teaching, to enhance students' national identities, to improve students' identity awareness, to develop students' learning qualities, and to extend Chinese culture all the way from within the community school to other cultures and to the next generation of Chinese educators. This is the first time that Chinese culture has been passed on to the next generation of diaspora people in the world [6].

The immigrant Chinese diaspora will still maintain entrenched Confucian views and with community school teachers who are also Chinese immigrants, the learners of culture, i.e. the learners of the heritage language, will also be subliminally indoctrinated. For example, the Chinese consider filial piety to be a very important virtue, and so it is reflected in family education, that is, the obligation of children to support their parents when they grow old. As previously mentioned, family education is also an important source of heritage language continuity.[10] The spirit of solidarity that Chinese culture promotes is also a cultural connotation that teachers and parents in community schools want their expatriate children to learn, and in community schools, teachers explain the specific meaning of

Confucian culture, contrasting it with British culture, so that students can develop a critical understanding in the learning process and thus construct the construct of a multicultural worldview.[4] In the process of learning, diaspora students are not single-minded recipients of knowledge and culture, but creators with the ability to think and act, by summarising the heritage language learnt in the community school into some element of Chinese culture and understanding the application of that culture.[4]

It is the belief of some parents that their children do not attend community schools solely for the purpose of passing language exams and obtaining good results, but also to appreciate the beauty of traditional Chinese culture and the sense of community school atmosphere, and it is the belief of some teachers in community schools that their children do not attend community schools solely for the purpose of learning Chinese and experiencing Chinese culture.[4] The findings of Ganassin's study revealed that students in community schools were more interested in learning through the experience of cultural activities, whereas teachers were more concerned with imparting theoretical knowledge of traditional moral concepts to their students, an approach that would result in students becoming resistant to learning. The complexity of Chinese culture makes it difficult to interpret Chinese culture to students in the context of real-life experiences and activities associated with traditional festivals, as demonstrated by the following examples. Given the diversity of Chinese culture, teaching values and morals in the classroom is combined with activities such as historical and cultural, practical experiences, and scenario simulations to ensure that students learn about a variety of topics.[4]

4. The role of heritage language in influencing identity

People may use language as a symbol of their social identity, although this view is considered to be an oversimplified understanding.[4] It has been stated that learners from Chinese communities in the UK need to understand identity perceptions and have an understanding of socio-cultural and intercultural knowledge when learning a hereditary language. The process of building one's identity perceptions is not a straightforward one, but rather a cross-cultural perspective of thinking about cultures worldwide and looking critically at the differences between cultures. Diasporas in countries of immigration may suffer from cultural misunderstandings and may be stereotyped because of their appearance with visible or non-visible ethnic characteristics. [7]

Chinese citizens emphasise nationalism and patriotism, and this is evident in the sense of national identity, so there will be some words in Chinese that convey a strong sense of patriotic ideology and education.[7] But for the diaspora, the original power of this language with nationalism and patriotism conveyed is weakened. Some Chinese diasporas emphasise a sense of 'belonging' and although their perceptions of identity change with migration and are fluid, they are taught to never forget their identity in the process of raising their next generation.[4]

In Chinese school textbooks, the subject of language is not only about learning the grammar and script of the language, but it is also about transmitting cultural values and carrying the moral beliefs of the Chinese people. For example, many of the 'four-character idioms' and 'celebrity allusions' in Chinese convey a variety of universal values, such as modesty, prudence, good learning, perseverance, and so on.[8] Some argue that intercultural Chinese language teaching should be matched with cultural diversity.

In community schools, it is important to construct language and culture to further construct identity, and by the time they enter community schools, children from the Chinese community already have a different identity from others because they are different compared to their local peers.[4] Rather than simply dividing different people according to nationality, region, ethnicity, etc., the point of interculturalism is to understand and recognise that the languages of different countries and cultures are intertwined and that not everyone has a single identity.[7]

Community schools provide a space for students to reflect and imagine the relationship between their community and their identity.[11] When learning heritage language in communities, students do not usually accept the absolute view of racism in its fullness, so if students are to engage in thinking about their own identities, they need to spontaneously negotiate their own identities in the context of learning heritage language practices [11]. At the same time, teachers who teach heritage languages undergo a process of re-perception in terms of their identity, for example, there are aspects in which political reasons and ideological differences affect people's perceptions of their own identity, as well as those of people with other identities.[4]

The use of legacy languages, as previously indicated in regard to 'belonging,' may create a sense of belonging to the diaspora as they go through the process of identifying with their own identity [4]. As people's identities shift in reaction to social, sociocultural, ideological, and even political situations, their perceptions of identity shift in response to social constructions, and the process of reshaping identity necessitates the use of language.[11] However, despite the fact that China is a multi-ethnic country with a multicultural concept that has already been experienced in China, the intercultural awareness of Chinese children who migrate to the United Kingdom depends on their acceptance of the cultural differences that exist between British and Chinese cultures.[4] Consequently, when exposed to cross-cultural environments, the adult diaspora uses community schools to provide children with knowledge of their heritage language and to strengthen their sense of national identity, while also developing their ability to recognise and strengthen their sense of Chinese identity. When children are exposed to cross-cultural environments, they develop a basic linguistic structure that influences their consciousness [4].

A number of people believe that the purpose of community education is to assist some Chinese expatriates in recognising their own identity, and others believe that learning Mandarin and experiencing Chinese culture will lead to the realisation that they are or were Chinese, and that through community education they will develop a sense of national pride and a sense of being proud to be Chinese [4]. It also has an emotional value; for example, generations who have been removed from the environment of their mother tongue will be connected by the Chinese language and will become closer, both to their own identity and to the identities of those around them, when they learn their heritage language [4]. Some parents may believe that it would be a shame if their child did not speak their heritage language because it would result in a lack of a bond between the parent and the child; however, this is not always the case.[5]

5. Conclusion

Using three dimensions: language, culture, and identity, this article investigates the relationship between and the impact of learning heritage languages in community schools following Chinese diaspora migration. The teaching of heritage languages at these community schools helps students develop a sense of belonging in the long run, and in the absence of adequate family education, they provide a good language environment for Chinese language learning. Additionally, they provide constructive feedback on the relevance of the learning process to diaspora students, all of which helps to further the development and integration of Chinese culture in the United Kingdom. As a result of the activities related to traditional Chinese festivals and events provided by the teachers in the community school, members of the diaspora will gain practical language skills while also being culturally enriched through the various poems and allusions taught by the teachers, thereby stimulating the diaspora's own cultural understanding and reflection, which will then lead to a positioning of their own identity and a multicultural perspective on their identity. Ultimately, this will lead to a more defined positioning of one's own identity, as well as an intercultural perspective.

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